



GOUGH AND INACCESSIBLE ISLANDS | Listed as World Heritage in 1995

Remote from human populations, islands remain relatively untouched

Gough Island and Inaccessible Island show “the world as it was created,” says Chris Bates. “They are among the last truly wild places on the planet. Nothing but sea all around, no ships, no planes. Just you and the whales and the birds and the waves and the wind and the sharks.”

Bates is Tristan da Cunha’s representative in the United Kingdom. The islands and their waters — in the South Atlantic, about halfway between South America and the southern tip of Africa — form one of the globe’s most remote Unesco World Heritage sites and are part of the U.K. overseas territory Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha.

Even among the 260-odd people who live in the Tristan de Cunha archipelago, the rugged landfalls of Gough (pronounced Goff) Island and the aptly named Inaccessible Island are terra incognita.

With tall cliffs, surrounded by turbulent seas, the islands are uninhabited (but for a small South African meteorological team on Gough) and remarkably difficult to reach. They were never permanently colonized by humans and were only temporarily occupied by

sealers, whalers and pastoralists during the 18th and 19th centuries.

“Because of their isolation, the islands represent some of the least disturbed temperate island systems in the world,” says Bates.

Peter Ryan, an ornithologist and a member of Tristan’s Biodiversity Advisory Group, calls these islands “the Galápagos in miniature.”

Both islands support seabird colonies of global importance. On Gough alone, the numbers are exceptional. Twenty seabird species nest on the island, including half the globe’s northern rockhopper penguins and around three million great shearwater breeding pairs, as well as rare birds like the wandering albatross and southern giant petrel.

“And it’s not just the seabirds,” says Ryan. “Inaccessible has the smallest flightless bird in the world, the Inaccessible Island rail.” Inaccessible also has an endemic bunting, or finch, which researchers like Ryan are studying in an effort to better understand

avian radiation (how species develop and change) and natural selection in the Tristan archipelago, in much the same way as Charles Darwin did in the Galápagos Islands.

The flora of both islands, as well as the animals of the surrounding ocean, are also varied and abundant. “The endemic plants and ferns of the islands are significant, as are the populations of fish and of marine creatures,” says Bates.

Among the larger animals that congregate around the islands are Shepherd’s beaked whales, southern right whales, humpbacked whales, fin whales and pilot whales, as well as fur seals, southern elephant seals, dusky dolphins and hammerhead sharks.

This past summer, Sue Scott, marine biologist, discovered a number of previously unknown sea creatures in the waters around Inaccessible and Gough during an oceanographic expedition on a British Antarctic Survey vessel. The unrecorded species included corals, worms, sea slugs, crustaceans and fish.

Despite its seclusion, the World Heritage site definitely has its threats. As elsewhere around the planet, illegal long-line fishing by Asian trawlers has found its way into the Tristan archipelago. Maritime pollution and the threat of oil spills or other accidents is another concern, especially in the wake of a wreck of a bulk-carrier cargo ship in 2011 that had a severe impact on several local bird species, including the penguins.

Authorities are considering a plan that would keep vessels a far greater distance from the archipelago than at present. Meanwhile, conservationists are urging that more equipment to tackle spills of oil and other hazardous substances be kept permanently on the islands.

“The biggest threats to Gough and Inaccessible at present are related to invasive alien species,” says Clare Stringer of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which supports much of the research on the islands.

Gough is plagued by introduced house mice that have evolved to three times their normal size. They prey on nesting chicks, eating them alive. “The mice seem to be having an impact on most of the birds, as

well as having probable impacts on the plants and invertebrates,” says Stringer. “Research on the Tristan albatross and Gough bunting indicates that both of these species are being driven toward extinction due to the impacts of mouse predation.”

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, together with the University of Cape Town and the Tristan government, has recently begun a mice-eradication test. If the pilot program proves successful, it will be extended to the entire island.

Although visiting Unesco World Heritage sites — and ticking them off a bucket list — is a growing travel trend, those familiar with Gough and Inaccessible say the islands will most likely never host tourism.

“These two islands are fantastically beautiful but also very fragile,” says Sean Burns, who recently completed a three-year stint as administrator of the overseas territory. “There are very strict rules about anybody landing on the islands from cruise ships. And even if those laws didn’t exist, they would be very difficult to get onto because of the immense cliffs.”

J.R.Y.

PEOPLE | Researchers in faraway places

‘Inaccessible’ is an almost literal description of the site

Located in the middle of the South Atlantic, about halfway between South Africa and Uruguay, Gough Island and Inaccessible Island present unique challenges to those trying to preserve the flora and fauna of these distinctive and unspoiled landscapes.

Neither island boasts an airstrip, which means that researchers, conservation officials and other visitors can’t fly in without the use of a helicopter. Imposing cliffs make it nearly impossible to land a boat on either island.

The South African polar research vessel S.A. Agulhas II calls upon Gough a grand total of once per year (normally in September) to resupply or relieve a small South African meteorological team at Transvaal Bay on the southeast coast. Those trying to reach Inaccessible have to arrange their own maritime transport.

Scientists with permission to carry out research on Gough usually hitch a ride on the Agulhas II. If they cannot complete their work during the two-to-three-week period when the ship remains in the Tristan da Cunha archipelago, they must remain on the island for an entire year.

“The remoteness of the islands does limit what we are able to do,” says Clare Stringer of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. “We can only send one team of two people to the island each year and they



Fur seals at Gough Island.

have to stay for 12 months. Running additional trips is extremely expensive. The other thing is that when things do go wrong — such as the oil spill in 2011, which affected some penguins at Inaccessible island — it is very difficult to get help out there quickly.”

“It’s certainly a challenge to get there,” says Peter Ryan, an ornithologist and member of Tristan’s Biodiversity Advisory Group. “In 1989, when I was doing my Ph.D. research, it took us five weeks to get from Tristan to Inaccessible! But the island’s isolation is also a huge benefit.”

Reaching the islands is only half the battle.

Those doing field research on Gough or Inaccessible must sleep in tents or very basic huts. The weather, especially the gale-force winds, is often harsh. And the isolation is extreme: one can go days or even months without seeing another human being.

The fieldwork tends to be a mix of basic research, monitoring the populations of threatened species, checking pollution levels and restoring the islands by helping to eradicate introduced species.

Yet there are those who relish toiling in this splendid isolation. John Cooper, a South African ornithologist who helped craft the nomination for World Heritage status and the International Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels, made his 18th visit to Gough this year.

“My first visit was in 1982, and I’ve been visiting every year since 2006 as part of the annual relief,” says Cooper, who gets there on the Agulhas II.

While Cooper admits that fieldwork on the islands can be difficult, the conditions don’t faze him. “The South African weather station has all needed facilities — power, hot water, light, deep freezers, Internet, plumbing, small lab, etc. — but is aging and is due to be replaced from 2015,” he says.

Life on Inaccessible Island is equally challenging. Researchers normally stay in a small hut at Blenden Hall on the west coast, but they also have the option of camping near a waterfall on the east coast or at a primitive campsite on the island’s plateau-like summit.

“Living conditions are fairly spartan,” says Ryan. “We have a solar panel to charge batteries, but otherwise live on what we take to the island (no refrigeration) and bathe in the stream (chilly).”

Yet for those who have gotten to know this far-flung corner of the planet, there is no finer place in all the world.

One of Cooper’s favorite spots on Gough Island is Gonydale, near the south coast, where he set up a long-term demographic study of the Tristan albatrosses in 2006. “The area is scenically attractive and is a welcome sight after a two-and-a-half-hour climb from the coastal weather station at Transvaal Bay.”

Ryan mentions one particular spot on Inaccessible. “We love to spend lunch at a place we call the Picnic Site, on the plateau rim overlooking South Hill, which is a mind-boggling trachyte plug that rises sheer from the sea for 350 meters,” or about 380 yards. “One of the reasons for spending so much energy getting to and working on these islands is they are inherently spectacular places,” Ryan adds. “We are extremely privileged to get here.” J.R.Y.

Gough and Inaccessible Islands is the 45th installment in the “Tides of Time” series about Unesco’s World Heritage marine sites. It was produced by the IHT Creative Solutions department and did not involve the newspaper’s reporting or editorial departments. “Tides of Time” is a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, the Unesco World Heritage Centre and the International Herald Tribune. Text by CLAUDIA FLISI and JOSEPH R. YOGERST.



REINVENT
YOURSELF

RENDEZ-VOUS NIGHT & DAY

Discover the Jaeger-LeCoultre
jewellery watch line at
ladies.jaeger-lecoultre.com



JAEGE-LECOULTRE